

"Unto my name."

Matt. 18: 20.

W. Kelly. (BT. Vol. N5, p.296.)

It is humbling and grievous when a servant of the Lord gives up any truth of God which he had not only held but advocated publicly, then doubted, and finally denies, from mere sentiment wresting scripture to popular error. Such is the character of "Gathering in the Name of the Lord Jesus." The friend who sent me the tract regards its writer as the best-taught man in their circle. Yet here he has sunk lower than many of his associates, even on his own showing in the first paragraph of p. 7; for they, if mistaken in their claim to be gathered to that Name, at least own it to be the only right aim for true worshippers. So sadly has he lost this truth as to stigmatise it as "the Corinthian school of 'Christ'" (p. 8) "against all the names of Paul, Apollos and Cephas!" "This is carnality," he says! Is it not deplorable to see a Christian become more unbelieving as he grows older? carried away by the Laodicean spirit of the day beyond many who probably know less, and blinded to excuse and spread utter laxity under cover of grace which is not grace? Can one honestly say less?

T. N. knows that those who in faith regard it as a special privilege and duty, to be gathered together to the Lord's name, are the farthest of any on earth from setting it against Paul, Apollos and Cephas. It was therefore wholly different with these frivolous Corinthians; who, whilst abiding in the same fellowship, did really and irreverently from their old philosophic habit set up in rivalry not those blessed servants only but the Divine Master as heads of opposing schools! Is there the least approach even to superficial resemblance? We dread all schism; we disclaim denominations or sects. These are what the apostle calls "heresies," and warns, in 1 Cor. 11: 18, 19, as the sure issue of unjudged schism. Yet the gist of this tract is to make light even of that graver evil, and goes so far as to rebuke the better desires of his own companions who left the sects, in order (as they judged) to be gathered to the Lord's name.

According to his present view, and "the Keswick motto," whether maintaining sects, or abjuring them, all Christians in the existing disorder and confusion, are alike gathered to His name! If he said that, as members of Christ and walking consistently, they are entitled to be received in His name and are free to take their place, it is true. But what if they ignore it and prefer a gathering according to their own views, or an organization that sets aside God's? Can it be that standing to this looseness, go where he will among orthodox denominations, he and other believers honour that precious privilege as truly as in apostolic days? There was an early man among Brethren (A. N. Groves.) who seems to have entertained or slipped into a similar negation of all divine principle. To simple and intelligent souls this was ever abhorrent. For it stultifies all scripture which treats of the church, and in particular this Epistle which T. N. perverts to his aid. Can he honestly believe that, when the apostle addresses the church of God that is in Corinth, "with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours," he sanctions separate sects, and accepts what he calls a heretic (Titus 3: 10, 11) as all the same gathered to the Lord's name? This is beyond doubt what the argument involves, as foolish a thought as it is faithless.

It is therefore mere evasion of "gathered to the name of Christ" if we pretend that when gathered as "Presbyterians and Episcopalians, Baptists and Methodists, and those who refuse all separating titles" (to take his own phrase in page 8), Christians, however earnest, are nevertheless gathered to His name. They are never so gathered whilst they abide in religious corporations framed on these extra-scriptural lines. Nor is the refusal of "separating titles" enough. There must be the positive gathering to

His name as the divinely given, only, and adequate centre for God's children, to the exclusion of all that is incompatible with it by the word and Spirit of God. Matt. 18: 15-20 supposes but one communion, no matter in how many places even in the same city they may meet. The church or assembly here and everywhere else in scripture implies inter-communion, and never allows of a fellowship independent and differing one from another. As the Head is one, so is the church according to God's will, who has sent forth the Holy Spirit to act as the power and bond of union for this end. "For also in one Spirit were we all baptised into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free, and were all given to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12: 13). See also Eph. 4.

But it is a delusion to fancy that if souls break away from divine unity for divers doctrines and governments of man's device, they are notwithstanding gathered to the Lord's name. Sect or heresy is insubjection to the Lord, whatever the plea to vindicate such a departure. The same apostle who laid down the principle of one body is the one to pronounce the man guilty of such self-will as perverted and sinning, being self-condemned. Heterodoxy or strange doctrine is quite another evil, which may go so far as to deny God's everlasting judgment of sin, or His glory who bore it away from all who believe. Surely great is the sin if one deliberately seeks to make light of the evil of denominations which directly oppose that for which Christ died: not, it is true, to save the lost, but to gather together into one the children of God that were scattered abroad (John 11: 51, 52). How bold to assert, that if Christians set up new limits of fellowship which narrow or broaden the divine will, they are to be notwithstanding condoned, and no less gathered unto His name than those who are faithful and obedient! Some may flatter themselves that this amiability is growth in grace; whereas it is increasing looseness, and the unwitting desire to excuse themselves and other careless Christians at the cost of Christ's honour and word, to say nothing of the personally present Spirit.

As to a junction of such believers to supplicate God the Father in the Son's name, they surely may, and never in vain for what is His will. But any union for the nonce falls far short of being gathered together unto His name. For this is nothing less than the constitutive principle of the church, abides always (even when not assembled) in its relation and its consequences, and has its "within" and "without" with incumbent duties permanently. He who refused subjection to righteous judgment of his manifest wrong, even to the extreme point of equitable and gracious desire to win him, was to be for a passing season as one of the outside Gentiles. He must, till repentance, lie under the stigma; as the rest would enjoy the standing privileges of their common relationship. For "the church" was to take the place of Christ- rejecting Israel on earth, of Jerusalem and the temple, though in living association with heaven far beyond Moriah or Zion. This is to read in faith what the Lord put into these verses; the tract forgets and tries to blot it out. Neither first nor last was the church to be a rendezvous for casuals. To be believers is not the point but to have His presence as the sanction of acts when gathered together to His name. To have the bishop as the centre with presbyters and deacons was the device of the second century and onwards; to have nothing but believers of all orthodox sects or of none is an abuse; to own the Lord in the midst of those (were they but two or three) who own no centre but the Lord is the sound and sole principle of God's church. But if it came to "two or three," what grief and humiliation became them, and utter refusal to arrogate to themselves "the" church, though eschewing all sects but taking their stand upon that ground of grace and truth and nothing else!

To assume that to be saints in the denominations makes them notwithstanding truly gathered together to the Lord's name opens the door to nullify the church, for which it substitutes a mere rope of sand. It is the device of latitudinarianism, and the abandonment of the Lord's promise to those who are gathered together unto His name. And what can be plainer, to those who have learnt from scripture the impending ruin evident already to inspired eyes and revealed in the Epistles and the Revelation, than

that the Lord before the beginning here as elsewhere intimates that the falling away might be so great that only two or three here and there might be thus gathered in faith of God's will ecclesiastically for fidelity here below? Yet does He deign to provide the sanction here promised to those who obey His word in face of trial and ill report, instead of following the multitude in pride of antique error, or turning to indifference, novelty, and what not.

In earlier days believers were freely received as Christ's members who, having no right notion of the church, were hardly to be counted guilty of departure from what was of God. Yet those who personally departed could plead for no such favour. But there is now an ominous change foreboding "the apostasy." No saint in those days tolerated the sacerdotalism of Christendom with its lie of apostolic succession as the warrant, its saving ordinances, and its idolatry with the real presence of a demon. Still less had we to challenge those who countenanced the gross scepticism of the Higher critics, though we had to refuse such as fell into the denial of God's judgment of sins or the soul's natural immortality. We are now bound to apply the later tests of scripture.

When giving up in principle that blessed privilege, how self-deceiving it is to say, "Oh let me ever be gathered, when gathered at all, in that Name! And what I prize so much myself let me not refuse to any saint of God." Some at least of his own company will not deny that he has himself falsified the Lord's mind, and that what he has just written does not come from God but can only mislead those who heed it. It is no question of refusing to any saint of God his true place and privilege, but of convincing the erring that to be of a denomination contradicts it, and that to claim both is unfaithfulness and folly. As I have no wish to expose bad reasoning and misapplied kindly feeling, I refrain from doing more than, for the help of souls, pointing out the writer's radical mistake and sad declension, with much regret that it is a plain duty to do so.